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22 September 1985*Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta*

Quite a String of Coincidences

Two disasters occurred within an hour of each other last June 23, half a world apart: First, a bomb exploded in the cargo area of Tokyo's international airport, killing two baggage handlers; then, an Air India plane crashed in the Atlantic off Ireland after an explosion, killing all 329 aboard.

Although newspapers received calls claiming responsibility for the crash on behalf of Sikh separatist groups, moderate and even hard-line Sikh leaders disclaimed any connection. The Indian government, fearful of inciting new troubles between Sikh extremists and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, has played down the possibility of a terrorist plot—at least in public.

But an intelligence report concludes that if the two tragedies that day were not connected "the coincidences would put any B-grade movie from Hollywood, Bombay or Madras to shame." Our associates Donald Goldberg and Indy Badhwar obtained a copy of the report. Here are the most important points it makes:

■ The Tokyo explosion occurred as baggage handlers were unloading the cargo of a Canadian Pacific Airlines jet that had landed from Vancouver. The baggage was due to be transferred to several other flights, including an Air India flight to Bangkok. The Air India plane that went down in the Atlantic was 45 minutes short of London on a flight from Toronto and Montreal.

■ Just two weeks earlier, a person believed to be of Indian origin bought two tickets at the Canadian Pacific office in Vancouver. The tickets were paid for in cash, which the report notes was "by itself a strange act in credit card infested North America."

The names of the passengers given for the tickets were Singh, which all Sikh men include in their names.

■ One of the tickets was for the flight from Vancouver to Toronto, with a requested connection to the Air India flight that never made it to London.

The other ticket was for the Canadian Pacific Vancouver-Tokyo flight in whose off-loaded baggage the bomb is believed to have exploded; it included a transfer to Air India's Tokyo-Bangkok flight, which was what was happening when the bomb went off two weeks later.

■ The routine customer-contact telephone number in Vancouver was the same for both tickets. The number had been listed earlier in the name of a known supporter of the Sikh separatist movement.

■ An "Indian-looking passenger" checked in for the Vancouver-Toronto flight and the connecting Air India flight to London. He was told that he was still on the waiting list for the Air India flight, but he insisted that his luggage be transferred to that flight anyway.

"After a long argument," the report

states, "CP Air decides (presumably as an exercise in good customer relations) to accept the baggage for interline transfer to Air India at Toronto."

But the argumentative passenger never boarded the Canadian Pacific flight to Toronto or, of course, the ill-fated Air India flight with which it connected.

■ An "Indian-looking passenger" also checked in for the Canadian Pacific flight to Tokyo that day, and "casually" asked that his luggage be booked through to Bangkok—that is, automatically transferred to his Air India connecting flight at the Tokyo airport.

Like the earlier eastbound passenger, this one failed to board his plane, which deposited its deadly baggage in Tokyo a few hours later.

■ The intelligence report suggests that explosives with timing devices were among the baggage checked through on both sets of tickets from Vancouver. Why did one bomb go off in an airport and the other in the air? The report speculates that both were intended to explode with less carnage in airport cargo areas in Tokyo and London—or that both were intended to blow up Air India planes in flight.

In either case, the lack of symmetry could be explained by a slight miscalculation in the setting of the timers.

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